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SUBJECT: CONSUL GENERAL MEETS UBCV PATRIARCH THICH HUYEN QUANG

REF: HANOI 1115; B) 04 HCMC 1482

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1. (SBU) Summary: In a private meeting on May 18, Thich Huyen Quang, Patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) told the Consul General that he is not optimistic about prospects for normalization of his organization's status. The 87 year-old monk said that he remains under effective pagoda arrest and expressed frustration over his inability to meet with UBCV Secretary General Thich Quang Do based in HCMC. In a separate meeting, the Consul General raised religious freedom concerns with Binh Dinh People's Committee Chairman Vu Hoang Ha, including a lengthy discussion on the UBCV. Ha expressed his "disappointment" with the political activities of the UBCV. He asserted that Thich Huyen Quang could travel anywhere and meet anyone, with the exception of Thich Quang Do, because of Thich Quang Do's anti-GVN stance. The government's approach to the UBCV has not changed since the Ambassador met with Thich Huyen Quang in Binh Dinh in November 2004 (ref b). It reflects the view that an independent UBCV is a potent threat to the Communist regime, one of the few areas of agreement between the GVN and UBCV leaders. End Summary.

Meeting with People's Committee Chairman

2. (SBU) During a May 18 visit to Binh Dinh province, the Consul General called on Chairman of the provincial People's Committee Vu Hoang Ha. The meeting, originally scheduled for 45 minutes, was extended by an hour to discuss religious freedom issues, especially the status of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and the province's treatment of its patriarch, Thich Huyen Quang. The Chairman opened the conversation on religious freedom by referencing the Ambassador's May 9 meeting with Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong (ref A). The Chairman said he was "disappointed" that the Ambassador told the Vice-Minister that Vietnamese citizens were arrested and imprisoned because of their political and religious beliefs. On the contrary, the people in question violated Vietnamese law, Ha said. Ha asserted that Binh Dinh province is proactive in its support of religious freedom. It facilitated the promotion of monks of the GVN-recognized Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS) and helped restore 333 of Binh Dinh's 364 pagodas.

3. (SBU) Before turning to issues facing the UBCV, the Consul General raised the Binh Dinh provincial authority's rejection of the transfer of a Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) pastor to Quy Nhon and denial of permission for other SECV provincial pastors to attend bible training in neighboring Quang Nam province. The CG urged provincial authorities to move quickly to register and recognize Protestant house churches under Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. Chairman Ha claimed he had no knowledge of problems involving the SECV and offered no further comment.

¶4. (SBU) Turning to the UBCV and Thich Huyen Quang, the Chairman became very animated. He stated that he "invited" Thich Huyen Quang to reside in Binh Dinh following his March 2003 surgery in Hanoi. (Note: Prior to his medical transfer to Hanoi, Thich Huyen Quang had been under pagoda arrest in Quang Nam province. End Note.) The Chairman said that he made it clear to Thich Huyen Quang that he could translate Buddhist texts and establish a training school for monks, but was not to involve himself in political activities. The Chairman claimed that Thich Huyen Quang did not comply and instead contacted the Venerable Thich Quang Do and "overseas elements.". (Comment: In October 2003, UBCV leaders held an organizational conclave in Binh Dinh. The meeting was broken up by government officials and many monks, including Thich Quang Do, placed under administrative detention. End Comment.) The Chairman also said that he was disappointed that Thich Huyen Quang "refused" his requests to meet, despite the goodwill that the province has shown.

¶5. (SBU) Chairman Ha claimed that when Thich Huyen Quang required medical treatment in November 2004, none of his followers would bring him to the hospital. That is why the Chairman ordered his personal car to take the monk to the hospital. The Chairman claimed that he directed hospital staff to treat the Thich Huyen Quang at any cost. When Thich Huyen Quang needed a blood transfusion, none of his supporters would donate blood; and the Chairman ordered provincial police to donate. "The blood of the Vietnamese Communist police flows through the Venerable's veins," the Chairman remarked.

¶6. (SBU) The Chairman stated in presence of local media that Thich Huyen Quang is not under pagoda arrest. He is free to travel anywhere he chooses with the exception of meeting with Thich Quang Do. The Chairman explained that this restriction is based on the fact that Thich Quang Do is plotting with Vo Van Ai (head of the Paris-based International Buddhist Information

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Bureau) and Nguyen Huu Chanh to overthrow the GVN. The Chairman asked the Consul General to convey his best wishes to the Thich Huyen Quang and that "at his age, he should lead a peaceful existence."

Meeting with Thich Huyen Quang -----

¶7. (SBU) Following the meeting with the Chairman, the CG met in private with Thich Huyen Quang for 45 minutes at the Nguyen Thieu Monastery. Although physically frail and supported by an assistant monk, the 86-year old Most Venerable was lucid and focused. A large photograph of UBCV monk Thich Quang Duc's 1963 self-immolation adorned one of the walls of the reception room. (Note: Thich Quang Duc burned himself to death at a busy Saigon intersection to protest President Diem's oppression of Buddhists. The self-immolation shocked international observers and spurred Diem's demise. End Note.)

¶8. (SBU) Thich Huyen Quang told the Consul General that there has been no change in the government's position that the UBCV is an extra-legal organization. Phone and mail communication is monitored, censored or completely cut, depending on the GVN. While he remains under effective "pagoda arrest," enforcement depends on the mood of authorities on any given day. He has had sporadic contact with Thich Quang Do in HCMC, but he has resigned himself to the probability that they never again will meet in person. Thich Huyen Quang told the CG that, despite GVN's opposition, the UBCV is determined to the 2,000 year Vietnamese tradition of maintaining Buddhist independence.

¶9. (SBU) Looking ahead, Thich Huyen Quang was pessimistic that any compromise with the Communist Party was possible. He was dismissive of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and said he would never support an organization whose internal elections were controlled by the government. However, he noted that VBS and government officials have sought his input on VBS personnel

issues. The VBS does heed his recommendations, Thich Huyen Quang noted. He added that at his monastery the UBCV runs a theological school that is training the next generation of UBCV leaders.

¶10. (SBU) Thich Huyen Quang was dismissive of Chairman Ha's comments that he is allowed travel with the exception of meeting Thich Quang Do. He told the CG that, "I told Thich Quang Do that we would have to meet in heaven." The Consul General assured Thich Huyen Quang that the issue of the UBCV is closely watched and that the U.S. Mission is committed to continue to pursue the issue with the national and provincial government.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: There was no apparent substantive change in the government's position on the UBCV in the 18 months since Ambassador Marine traveled to Binh Dinh in November 2004 (ref B). The GVN considers the UBCV to be a serious threat to the regime and will not legalize its status or allow senior leaders to operate freely. The prominent position of the picture of the 1963 self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc in Thich Huyen Quang's reception room is a stark visual reminder to the GVN of the latent threat of the UBCV. That said, the GVN is calibrating its stance carefully, both because of international scrutiny and because of the stature of the UBCV leadership in the Buddhist community. For his part, although overtly less political than his deputy Thich Quang Do in HCMC, Thich Huyen Quang made clear his continuing opposition to any compromise that would dilute complete UBCV independence. End Comment.
Winnick